FOR YOUR INFORMATION

EPISCOPAL DIOCESE of ROCHESTER

935 EAST AVENUE
ROCHESTER, N. Y. 14607

January 17, 1975

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
JAN 20 1975

STATEMENT

To: The Diocese of Rochester

From: The Bishop

Ten days ago the Standing Committee responded to my request for advice about what action, if any, should be taken by this Diocese to clarify the ordained status of the Rev. Merrill Bittner who, as a Deacon in good standing in the Diocese, was presented for ordination as a priest in Philadelphia on July 29, 1974.

The Standing Committee advised me that it was its opinion that the irregularity in the ordination can and should be corrected at the earliest possible opportunity.

I have today informed the clergy of the Diocese that in my judgment that opportunity will come when the General Convention of the Episcopal Church has acted upon the principle of ordaining women as priests in this Church.

In arriving at this decision I have consulted widely throughout the Church and received advice and assistance from many sources, including the Presiding Bishop, the bishops of nearby dioceses, and canonical experts on both sides of the question.

As one who strongly desires to see women functioning as priests in the Episcopal Church and who believes that the House of Bishops' conclusion about the validity of the

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Philadelphia ordinations was a hasty and mistaken one which will one day be corrected, I make the decision to postpone regularization of Merrill Bittner's status as priest with great reluctance.

I do so for two primary reasons.

First, there is a substantial body of informed opinion in the Episcopal Church that no bishop or diocese, acting unilaterally, can correct the irregularity of the Philadelphia ordinations until the General Convention has stated its position in some formal manner. There is no uniformity of opinion as to what that General Convention action should be: canonical change, constitutional change, or simply passage of a resolution embodying its position. I state now that I will regard any indication by the next General Convention of its acceptance of the principle of ordaining women as priests as sufficient to permit me, as a diocesan bishop acting in concert with a Standing Committee, to regularize the priestly status of Merrill Bittner.

Secondly, I am convinced that if I were to act now to regularize the status of one of the persons ordained in Philadelphia, it would damage seriously the chances of the General Convention's adopting the principle of ordaining women as priests when it meets next year. In making this decision, I have tried to concentrate on its meaning for the Diocese of Rochester, for which it is made, and where the consequences will be lived out. I am conscious, however, of

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the many women in the Diaconate and in the seminaries throughout the Church whose future may be directly affected by my decision, as well as of the growing numbers of Episcopalians who are committed to favorable action by the next General Convention. I am convinced that a harmful backlash of severe proportions would have been created by regularizing now.

I intend this action to be seen as a contribution to an orderly process of changing the Church's present opinion about ordaining women as priests. I will be attentive for the response to this action of mine, particularly from those who plead for more time to help Church people to adjust, and trust that such pleas do not turn out to be simply another excuse for resistance and delay.

I am also aware of what a burden this decision puts on the person most directly affected, Merrill Bittner, as also on those who have actively supported her and those who have come to count on and value her ministry. In the midst of all the tensions of the last six months, she has conducted herself with exemplary consideration and honesty, and with commendable self-restraint. That conduct is in itself a testament to the conscientious conviction which has been hers from the beginning. I extend the duration of her uncertainty with the greatest reluctance.

I hope that my action will contribute to the Episcopal Church's acting decisively and with unmistakable clarity at the next General Convention to make its ordained ministry inclusive of persons both male and female.

Robert R. Spears, Jr.
Bishop

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